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Mr. Savage's Sermon "The Problem of the Hour."

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Mr. Savage's Sermon, "The Problem of the Hour."

Editor Commonwealth: - I have just finished reading this sermon, preached by one whose discourses are usually a refreshment and a help, and I have read it with such feelings of disappointment, astonishment and pain that I cannot refrain from making a few comments upon it.

In the beginning, Mr. Savage tells us that he is going to view this present absorbing political situation from a Southern standpoint. He is certainly to be congratulated upon his success. In most respects - I say it with sadness - this sermon is worthy of a veritable Southern slaveholder, born and bred. It is hardly possible to believe that it could have been delivered by a Republican, as Mr. Savage says he is, and "the son of a Republican of the blackest stripe." He also says:

"I may appear to put undue emphasis upon the way in which the Southerner regards the question in which we are at present involved, but it will not be because I agree with, or wish to defend, the position that the South has occupied in our history; and this will appear plainly as I advance in my discussion." To one reader, at least, this is the very point that does not appear plainly.

Mr Savage asks us to consider, first, wherein lies the grand difference between the North and the South, and says that it is not simply because there were slaves there and none here, nor for other reasons that he enumerates, but that "the difference comprehends all these and a great deal more. It means simply a grand fundamental, dividing difference of civilization:" and he tells us that "the South as a whole, must be placed one hundred, two hundred, for aught he knows

five hundred years behind the North in the matter of what we mean when we say civilization." What except slavery is the great primary cause of this difference in civilization? Yet Mr. Savage tells us that "we of the North unless we have travelled in the South, and become accustomed to their modes of thought (vide Dr. Adams's "Southside View of Slavery"), are too apt to look upon individual cases of wrong and crime until the whole South is blackened and colored by it." I do not know whether Mr. Savage has either travelled or lived in the South, but I have done both, and yet not, thank Heaven! "become accustomed to its modes of thought;" and I can say with perfect truth that the South is blackened and blighted by the effects of slavery. It seems to me that he admits this when he says that he "questions whether there is any crime or wrong that we can conceive of that is not somehow connected with slavery, or that, some time or other, has not grown out of the slavish condition of races." Is not this virtually admitting that slavery is an unmitigated evil? And, if it be so, could it fail to "blacken and color" a community in which it prevails so generally as in the South? But, in the same paragraph, Mr. Savage tries to prove to us that slavery is not an unmitigated evil; that "it originated in the fact that a tribe or nation, instead of butchering its captives taken in war, as had formerly been done, made them the slaves of the conqueror." From this he infers that slavery did not originate "in the base, the selfish, the degraded and worst elements of mankind," but "in principles of humanity, justice and love." A strange inference, truly! I confess I fail to recall a single instance in history when humanity and justice caused a conqueror

to make slaves of his captives taken in war. To grace his triumph, in the old Roman days, to serve his uses, always, these were the motives which led him to enslave instead of killing them. ~~The~~ latter method would have been far more merciful than reducing them to slavery. But it is not apparent that the quality of mercy entered into the conqueror's calculations more than it did into the hearts of those Americans who went to Africa and stole men and women and exposed them for sale in our free and glorious republic! Mr. Savage weakens his argument, even from the Southern standpoint, when he tries to apologize for the crime of slavery, which the majority of mankind still believe did have its origin in the worst, basest, most selfish elements of human nature.

Again, Mr. Savage reminds us, in his apology for the present attitude of the South, that, a hundred and fifty years ago, the very best men of the North defended slavery equally with the men of the South, and instances Jonathan Edwards. To this we have only to reply, so much the worse for Jonathan Edwards and the best men of the North! It does not detract from the sinfulness of slavery that they defended it. It does detract very seriously from their high reputation.

Mr. Savage asks us to remember that the slaves at the South represented almost the entire property of the South, and inquires of the men of Boston whether, supposing their property to be unjustly acquired, they would be ready to turn themselves out of doors and impoverish themselves, their wives and children, and begin anew in the world, "at the call of any man who should come to them claiming to stand on a higher moral plane, who should look down upon them with Pharisaic contempt." Of course they would not! That strikes me as a very foolish question. If people either steal property themselves

or inherit stolen property, and keep it, it does not often happen that they can be induced by the promptings of their own conscience, or the arguments of others, to give it up. In a few cases, even among slaveholders, this was done, but very rarely. But are people to be held guiltless of the wrong they do because of their moral obtuseness? The law answers this question by taking away stolen property and punishing the thief when it has the power to do so. And in cases where the civil law cannot reach, all the more imperative is a strict judgment according to the moral law. Such an argument as the one to which Mr. Savage descends seems to me most unworthy of a Christian minister. In the pulpit, if anywhere, we have a right to expect strict adherence to the distinction between right and wrong. Any appeal to purely interested and selfish motives is unpardonable in a minister of the gospel. Mr. Savage forgets his own fine definition of the province of the pulpit: "To hold itself aloof, as far as possible, from the angry discussions and prejudices of men, seeking to stand on some higher level, in the clearer light of the Divine air, and, so far as may be, looking over the concerns of men as He looks at them who has made and who leads civilization." Would He hesitate to rebuke wrong-doing because the wrong-doers believed themselves to be right, or said that they believed so? Can anything be more deplorable than such moral blindness?

I pray the prayer of Plato old:
God make me beautiful within;
And let mine eyes the good behold
In everything but sin!

Mr. Savage says that slavery was our "Sphinx's riddle." The South, as well as the North, stood looking at it, and "endeavoring to

find some way by which they could relieve the country of this great incubus that weighed upon its life and its prosperity, and that threatened to be its destruction." That a part of the North did this is true. But I think it is the general impression that a large part of the North, and the whole South, almost without exception, did not try to relieve the country from slavery, and did desire its continuance and its extension. And this impression I believe to be the true one. If Mr. Savage has any proof to offer to the contrary it will be gladly received. We also know it to be true that the rebellion of the South and its attack upon the federal government were caused by slavery, and slavery alone, and that its avowed desire was to found a Southern empire based upon slavery. And not a few Northern men sympathized with it.

Mr. Savage tells us that "the whole business of the South hung by the one thread of cotton. It meant their houses, their churches, their schools, their homes, their pictures, their books, their carriages, with horses prancing at the door; it meant their journeys; it meant their culture; it meant all the refinement of their civilization." True; but let us look at the other side of the shield. What did it mean to the slave? To him it meant exactly the reverse of all these comforts, privileges, luxuries and delights. To him it meant ignorance, degradation, unpaid toil, untold suffering, being bought and sold like the beasts of the field, indignity of every sort. When we think of this other meaning of that "thread of cotton" we cannot so much regret that it is broken - that the many are no longer to be sacrificed for the pleasure and profit of the few; our sympathy with the losses of the slaveholder are not so

overwhelming; and it does not seem to us such a terrible hardship, but rather a desirable discipline, and a piece of simple justice, that he who has always lived upon the proceeds of the unpaid labor of others should now have an opportunity of working for his own support, as his Northern brethren do.

Again, Mr. Savage says: "We get very indignant, principally through our newspapers here at the North, because some Southerner is not willing to ride in a railroad-car with a colored man, or because he does not like to meet him on equal terms in a hotel; and in my soul I believe that we have a right to be indignant at such a thing as that anywhere, North or South." But then, very consistently, Mr. Savage proceeds to prove to us that we have no right to censure this feeling on the part of the Southerner because in California the Chinese are as much outraged and abused as the colored people of the South, and because in New York the wealthy and aristocratic refuse to associate with the poor! - all of which seems very much like proceeding upon the principle that two wrongs, or three, make a right. How California abuse of the Chinese, or New York contempt for the poor, makes it more excusable for the white Southerner to despise the negro I fail to see. Doubtless there is a fellow-feeling among all oppressors of the poor. And there seems to be no reason why those who see the wrong should not censure it, whenever it is practiced. As a clincher to this argument (after telling us that some rich church-members in New York refused to associate with the poor ones), Mr. Savage adds: "And this is a refusal to associate on equal terms, not with disagreeable and barbarous and ape-like colored people (the italics are mine, not his), but with people of their own blood, people

of their own race, people morally and intellectually their equals, and perhaps their superiors." The epithets applied to colored people seem to me a very gratuitous insult, and a decidedly unchristian expression of contempt for a much-abused people; not at all what one would expect to hear from the lips of a Christian minister. In being thus contemptuous he has made himself contemptible, as those always do who sneer at the weaker side. Perhaps it is on account of the hopeless obtuseness of these "disagreeable, barbarous and ape-like colored people" that they cannot understand why the master and mistress who admitted them to the closest personal intimacy when they were slaves should feel outraged at sitting in a railroad-car or at a hotel-table with them now that they are free, and cleaner, better dressed, more civilized, than before. It is rather an interesting question, and one that I should like to have Mr. Savage answer, what the exact proportion of African blood is which is required to make people "disagreeable, barbarous and ape-like"? In this country, especially in the South, it is difficult to draw the line. In the cities of Columbia and Charleston, among the better class of colored people, I met not more than two or three who did not appear to have a very large proportion of Anglo-Saxon blood, many of them being perfectly white in complexion, with regular features and straight hair; living witnesses these, and hundreds beside, all over the South, of the horror and natural antipathy which the white Southerner entertains for the black! How can we expect him to contaminate himself by sitting in the same car with the latter, however respectable or well-dressed or well-behaved?

Mr. Savage says that he believes, as the Southerners maintain, that in general the colored people were better off in slavery than they were immediately after they were set free. What does he wish to prove by this? That slavery was a blessing to them? But that cannot be, as he has already admitted it to be a curse. I can see, therefore, no use whatever in his worn-out argument of the South. No doubt many of the slaves were better off physically, in the sense of being better clothed and better fed, before the war, than since. Yet, in a residence of some years at the South, coming into contact with numbers of the freedmen, I have never seen one, however kindly treated when in slavery, who did not rejoice in his freedom, and say that nothing could induce him to be a slave again; not one who would not endure a hundred-fold the privations which he had endured for the sake of being free. I know it is said that there are some who regret their days of slavery, but I have never seen one, and have never met a person who has seen one. I have heard innumerable and most grateful prayers offered to God, and most touching thanks to Lincoln, for bestowing upon them this great blessing of freedom; and I have listened to many stories of cruel treatment, and seen results of it so horrible, so heart-sickening, that, had Mr. Savage witnessed them, I think he could hardly believe that slavery originated in principles of humanity, justice and love, and that the horrors we have heard of it were only stories to be found in "one kind of newspaper literature, and a certain class of books, written all from one side." I think he cannot have read the "Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin," in which the most heart-rending stories are authenticated. But how can any intelligent man, in this nineteenth century, need to be told that the evils and horrors of slavery are no invention of

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the imagination? Mr. Savage himself says that the effect upon the master was, perhaps, worse than upon the slave. Was not the worst effect the imbruting him, the deadening of the feelings of mercy and humanity within him?

The truest thing that Mr. Savage says is that the South is not reconciled to the results of the war; that "it does not usually put a man in good nature to be thoroughly and mercilessly whipped." It would be well if this fact could be sufficiently impressed upon those gushing and too credulous Northerners who will not believe, despite all proof, that their brotherly affection and eager desire for reconciliation are not reciprocated by the South, and probably will not be until two or three generations have died out. Magnanimity is fine and praiseworthy; servility is not. Nor does the Scripture enjoin upon us to love our enemies more than our friends. In the long dark struggle with rebellion the colored people of the country, though so long the objects of oppression, in which the North shared the blame with the South, faltered not in their loyalty to a government to which they owed but little, and, by their active aid, helped to save the country. This especially embittered the Southerners against them. Do not these loyal blacks, and the loyal Northern whites living in the South, who not only lost all their property, but were imprisoned and subjected to suffering and indignity of all sorts for their devotion to the Union - do not these deserve some of the sympathy which has been lavished so freely upon the rebels who outraged them? And in judging of the misgovernment of which some of the freedmen have been guilty it should be remembered that this is, in a large measure, due to the ex-slaveholders themselves. Had they, at the close of the war, shown a friendly feeling toward their former

slaves, the latter, who, as a rule, had no bitter feeling against masters who had treated them kindly, would doubtless have chosen many of them for their political leaders, if convinced that they would deal with perfect justice and fairness towards them. Had they pledged themselves to secure to the colored people every civil and political right they would be at the head of the government in South Carolina to-day, working in perfect harmony with their former slaves, to whom their superior intelligence and political experience would be a constant source of education. But they did not do this, because they had not, and have not, any desire to grant their rights to the colored people, but, on the contrary, a determination to reduce them to a condition as nearly like that of slavery as possible. Thus the freedmen were thrown into the hands of adventurers, Northern and Southern, who took advantage of their ignorance to use them as tools for their own private advantage. In judging of the present aspect of Southern affairs the difficulty lies simply in this: there are very few persons at the North, however liberal, besides the few old, tried, radical abolitionists, who really believe, in their heart of hearts, that the colored man is entitled to exactly the same rights as the white man. This is proved by their present tone in speaking of the South. Negro legislatures, much less corrupt than some leading and educated New York politicians, are mercilessly ridiculed and abused, and the most ingenious lies invented about them. One Northern minister said, not long ago, that he hoped Wade Hampton would be elected Governor of South Carolina, because in the States where the Southern whites had control of the government there was more tranquility than in the others, and the negroes had their rights and were better off. Had he said that the negroes in those States had

all the rights to which he and their former masters considered them entitled, he would have been nearer the truth. In Georgia, one of these "tranquil States," no colored person, however respectable, can ride in a first-class railway-car, and women of respectability, refinement and even beauty, apparently not "disagreeable, or barbarous, or ape-like," although colored, have been thrust from a car and forced to ride with the lowest, roughest men in a smoking-car dirty and disgusting to an extent of which Northern people have no idea. This is a specimen of "equality" in Georgia and other States in which the ex-rebels have the control. Would the minister to whom I have referred be satisfied with such equality for himself, his family, or his friends? Fortunately, God does not see even as Northern Christian ministers see. I have too deep a reverence for him to believe that he intends one kind of treatment for the white man and another for the black!

No one can deplore more deeply than I what corruption there has been in colored legislation. But I happen to know that much of it has been grossly misrepresented by Southern papers and rebel sympathizers. What authority Mr. Savage has, beyond the rebel papers, for the discreditable story he tells of one colored legislature, I do not know. I do know, however, that he gets a little "confused in his mind," as the freedmen say, when he talks about their squandering money which their former masters "have labored for years to accumulate." He quite forgets that it is these ignorant blacks who accumulated all this money, during years of unpaid toil, of being scourged, and bought and sold, and that, after all, they are really, in a great measure, taking their own. Might not an unprejudiced eye even see, in this, one instance of poetic justice?

" Pay ransom to the owner? Ay!
And fill the bag to the brim -
Who is the owner? The slave is owner,
And ever was. Pay him!

I will add but a few words in reference to what Mr. Savage says about sending troops to the South. He denounces the measure, while admitting that disorders and outrages do occur at the South. He says: "This is not the way, it seems to me, to heal the matter. It is a matter for time, a matter of growth, a matter for schooling; a matter for patience, a matter for the calmest wisdom to deal with that we can command. We must indeed protect every man, white and black, so that he may walk at peace beneath the folds of our common flag." But he fails to specify how this protection is to be given, in the present emergency, if not by force of arms. Patience and calmness are excellent things at the right time; but while we are exercising our patience and calmest wisdom, and composedly talking about "matters of growth," and "matters of schooling," thousands of loyal people in the South may be shot down while in the peaceful performance of their duties. Hamburg massacres, and innumerable other outrages which have been perpetrated there, will hardly be stopped by philosophizing, or even by Christian forbearance. If troops were needed at the South when the rebels attacked Fort Sumter, they are needed quite as much now when the same rebels are shooting down loyal people, white and black, and openly proclaiming a reign of terror and violence. Yet, with these outrages, which have been proved, fresh in our memories, Mr. Savage makes to us the astounding statement that he has "only the highest admiration for the peace, the calm, the quiet" with which the white Southerners have endured indignities, "looking for redress only to the law"!

But I have occupied far too much space. I have felt it my duty - although a most painful and disagreeable one, for I have had hitherto much admiration and respect for Mr. Savage - to say what I have said because it seems to me that such words, uttered by a minister of his wide influence, may do infinite harm. I feel them to be, in many respects, most unfair and unchristian. He pleads for a Christian spirit in our judgment of the South, but by the South he evidently means only the white people of the South, and ignores, or mentions only to condemn, the colored people, who are the larger, the long-suffering, and almost the only loyal, part of the Southern population. Therefore it is well that some one should try to place the matter in a point of view which may enlist a little sympathy in their behalf, also. If the views expressed by Mr. Savage are those entertained by most Republicans, and the "sons of Republicans of the blackest stripe," I can only say, in his own concluding words, "from these, above all things, may the good Lord in heaven deliver us!"

Charlotte L. Forten